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My Relationship with Relationships MFA Exhibition + Written Component

By: Elisha Burley



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UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS
ARLINGTON

Art + Art History
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This book is dedicated to my parents Margaret and Maurice Burley

This book is also dedicated to everyone who supported and believed in me
through this journey in life, and for that I thank you.

Forward

Over the past three years, I have witnessed a young lady break out of her shell and embrace new challenges and experiences. When Elisha first came into the program she was not sure of herself– she was still struggling to find her cinematic voice. After much trial and error, she realized that she was interested in the dynamics of relationships and how external circumstances affect the most intimate aspects of said relationships. Her work aims to dissect the lives of those yearning for inner-peace: a widowed father in A.F.L.; and a girl searching for what she considers to be beauty in the Lust segment of Seven Sins. Although her cinematic voice still needs refinement, a depth that only life experience can bring, each film that she completed, as writer and director, showed progress and a deeper understanding of the craft. Elisha's graduation from our program should not be seen as an end, but rather a beginning. She has so many stories left to tell and is still exploring her artistic voice.

-Ya'ke Smith, Major Professor

Artist Statement

My films take a deeper look into how people connect and communicate in different types of relationships. In each film, a relationship is explored: father/daughter, best friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, and even with one's self. I am interested in the dynamics of relationships and how each person in a relationship responds to the strain that is placed upon it by outside forces. Some conflicts are resolved and the relationship is better for it, while others become strained or dissolve all together.

MFA Exhibition Images



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



A.F.L., 1920x1080, 2012



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Vanity", 1920x1080, 2013



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Greed", 1920x1080, 2013



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Wrath", 1920x1080, 2013



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Envy", 1920x1080, 2013



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Gluttony", 1920x1080, 2013



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Lust", 1920x1080, 2013



VII Hamartia (7 Sins), "Sloth", 1920x1080, 2013

Written Component

Introduction

My films take a deeper look into how people connect and communicate in different types of relationships. In each film, a relationship is explored: father/daughter, best friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, and even with one's self. I am interested in the dynamics of relationships and how each person in a relationship responds to the strain that is placed upon it by outside forces. Some conflicts are resolved and the relationship is better for it, while others become strained or dissolve all together.

Being exposed to different interactions with people throughout my life is what piqued my interest in relationships. While being sheltered growing up in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the main relationships I had were with my family. Although we were family, our relationship dynamics were all different. My father and I did not always get along and this was blatant. It took me time to realize the problem we had but that was just the start.

Throughout high school I came across many different kinds of people with different personalities. I used to observe people and wonder why some people would hang out together and what draws their attraction to each other. I became fascinated with understanding why people chose their friends. This interest led me to the idea of creating scenarios in which characters form relationships and interact based on the situations they are put in.

At Bennett College for Women, I took a class that required me to analyze several films. The two films that left an impact on me from this class were *Un Chien Andalou* and *Schindler's List*. *Un Chien Andalou*, the 1929 silent film by

Luis Buñuel, was a movie that did not have a set plot but rather a group of different people interacting with each other in some way. The film featured different stages of relationships: the beginning, decaying, and resurrection. Schindler's List was another movie, which inspired me to view the dynamics of different relationships. In Schindler's List, Oskar Schindler is a German businessman who uses Jewish people as cheap labor during the Holocaust. As he sees the horrific events of the Holocaust; he saves over 1000 Jewish people. These two films covered different relationships. While *Un Chien Andalou* dealt with relationships about love and Schindler's List dealt with humanity and business relationships, both movies helped me to focus on what subject matter I planned to base my future movies on.

During my graduate studies at The University of Texas at Arlington, I further explored relationship dynamics and produced several films centered on the subject. *Anniversary* is about a woman who yearns to marry her beau, after only knowing him for a short amount of time; *The First Night*, is centered on a newly married couple noticing each other's bad habits after living with each other for the first time; In *Thicker Than Blood*, a couple learns that they are related during "pillow talk"; Relationships to one's self is shown in *Procrastination*, a story about a student who waits until the last moment to start a project and thereby pays the consequence; *Blockage*, is a short film about a student who is having difficulty brainstorming ideas for her script; *A.F.L. (A Father's Love)*, focuses on a widower father who has a strained relationship with his teenage daughter, and lastly, *VII Hamartia (7 Sins)*, is several short stories about the relationship between the age-old sins and their manifestation in today's world.

For the purpose of this thesis I will focus on the two movies *A.F.L.*

and *VII Hamartia*. I will cite film sources that have directly influenced my work and I also will document how experiences and research are foundations to the films creations.

The Making's of *A.F.L. (A Father's Love)*

A.F.L. (A Father's Love) is a story loosely based on the relationship between my father and I. We had a rocky relationship when I was a teenager, because he was quite overprotective to the point of smothering. We never quite saw eye-to-eye and our relationship was strained because of it. *A.F.L.* centers on Reggie, a grieving widowed father raising his teenage daughter Corinne. Unable to cope with the loss of his wife and fearing that his "little girl" is growing up and will soon leave the nest, Reggie tightens his grip on Corinne, which threatens their relationship.

The impact of an unexpected death can hinder or strengthen a relationship. The film, *My Girl*, heavily influenced me during the writing process of *A.F.L.* Howard Zieff, the director of *My Girl*, displays the relationship between father and daughter as stagnant and awkward throughout the movie. The father, Harry Sultenfuss, is a widower who has to raise his young daughter. The communication between him and his daughter, Vada, is strained and almost non-existent. After the death of her best friend, Harry realizes his relationship needs to become stronger in order to emotionally support her. *Crooklyn*, by director Spike Lee, also tells a story about a widowed father who is left to raise his daughter on his own. The family struggles during the movie, but their relationship never falters. Both of these films incorporate an unexpected death, which helps an awkward

father/daughter bond become stronger. The tones of these films are sincere and the directing of the characters and their relationships is skillfully shown. The slow, gradual pace of both of these films influenced the importance of the storyline in my film.

Throughout *A.F.L.* several topics are explored, the first being feelings of solitude and loneliness. In one scene in particular, Reggie is sitting outside of his workplace and sees a couple walking by. The couple's happiness brings up memories of his wife, leaving him feeling melancholy and deserted. The cold, gloomy day helps signify his loneliness. Another scene finds Reggie sitting on the edge of his bed and looking over at his wife's nightstand. The camera is focused on the wife's side of the bed to show the emptiness in the room. The scene was filmed at night with blue toned lighting to signify the isolation he feels. A picture of the couple, along with a bottle of her perfume, sits on the nightstand. These items are a constant reminder to Reggie that her presence is still there. The scene again illustrates Reggie's inability to come to terms with his wife's death. This solitude and loneliness causes Reggie to "protect" his daughter since she is all he has.

The theme of overprotection is prevalent in *A.F.L.* In the water fight scene Reggie comes home from work and sees Corinne and Monty, Corinne's Boyfriend, having a water fight across the street. He yells for Corinne to get inside. As she runs towards her father, he asks her about her friendship with Monty. She does not disclose that they are seeing each other but rather tells him they were just jogging. This shows Reggie's concern that Corinne may be getting

too close to Monty and he does not want to lose her. The next scene with this theme is the stairway scene. Corinne, who is livid over the embarrassment she was subjected to earlier in the film, meets a regretful Reggie at the stairways. Reggie starts off the conversation with the line "I was just trying to protect you". Medium and close up shots are used in the scene to make the feeling tense and frustrating. This establishes that he felt Corinne was in some kind of danger because he was not around. His misconception of Monty's motives has him acting as if he is Corinne's overseer instead of her father. After Corinne comes up the stairs she is on the top flight of the stairs while Reggie is on the bottom. This signifies how Reggie is remorseful and subdued, while Corinne is embarrassed and livid. For this brief moment, the power seems to be taken over by Corinne.

Because of Reggie's overprotection of Corinne, a disconnection in their relationship is felt throughout the film. For example, on the way to school, Corinne and Reggie have a conversation about basketball, a sport they both like. Close up shots from the passenger seat show the fun-loving interactions between them. When Corinne sees Monty, all communication from Corinne stops. This causes her to disconnect from her father and put all the focus on Monty. This theme is also shown in the scene after the argument in the parking lot. Corinne has missed curfew and Reggie has gone out to search for her. When he finds her in an empty parking lot in a car with Monty, Reggie is outraged. The camera is handheld in the scene. Medium and close up angles are used to express the intensity and anger in all of the characters. The lighting is dim with only the parking lot lights highlighting their isolation of being in the abandoned

parking lot. Reggie and Corinne are disconnected from what each other's motives are. Reggie believes he is doing the right thing while Corinne feels the opposite.

Due to this disconnection between Reggie and Corinne, a lack of communication grows between the two. In one scene Reggie and Corinne are watching a basketball game, which is their usual bonding time. The tone of the scene is warm and peaceful and relaxing. The game is interrupted by a text message from Corinne's boyfriend Monty asking if she can go out. Corinne makes up a lie, asking if she can go out with some friends later on in the week. This makes Reggie skeptical and he hesitates to let her go. The lack of communication is most evident in the last two scenes of the film. After Reggie's contemplation on the stairs, he places his wife's shirt on Corinne's door as his way of apologizing. Similarly, when Reggie gets home from work and Corinne is watching a basketball game, Corinne removes her belongings from the couch so Reggie can sit down. Both of these actions show the lack of verbal communication. Neither character verbally apologizes to each other but would rather show it in gestures. Reggie comes to terms with the death of his wife and realizes that being over-bearing to his daughter is making the relationship strained. This scene is in a way a new starting point for them. Everything between them is not resolved, but they are in the beginning stages of patching up their strained and rocky relationship.

The Making's of *VII Hamartia* (7 Sins)

Admired, misunderstood and dreaded, the seven deadly sins have become a measurement for how people evaluate their "level" of wrongdoing. Historically, there were originally eight sins. During the 4th Century, Evagris Ponticus listed

eight evil sins: gluttony, fornication, avarice (greed), self-esteem (pride), envy, wrath, boasting, and acedia, which is a state of listlessness or torpor. In 590 AD, Pope Gregory shortened the list to seven and made them what they are today: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, jealousy, and pride ("The Seven Deadly Sins"). The purpose of the film, *VII Hamartia* (7 sins) is to show how each sin is influenced by societal standards.

Vanity (Pride) is the "Mother" of all the sins. Historically the meaning of vanity is the extreme belief that one is far more attractive than others. The color of vanity is purple and carries an arrogant or pompous illusion, which is why the prideful character, Rebecca, wears a purple blouse. The location for this segment of the film is a public restroom, which was uniquely inspired by a scene in the film *Mean Girls*. The scene finds one friend confiding in the other in the restroom of their high school about a problem she is having. The public restroom is a space that is open but can also be intimate enough to have a short private conversation. The feel of the scene gives the viewer a sense that the two friends have a consoling relationship. The entire segment is shot in tight, medium close ups, demonstrating the characters' familiarity and close knit-relationship. The compositions also subconsciously cue the audience into the main character's envious nature, which will be explored in one of the later segments.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder is often characterized by vanity. In the movie, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the character of Tom Ripley takes on the life of someone else. He is using his devious ways to deceive people and manipulate them for his advantage. Rebecca, much like Tom Ripley, is a user.

She does not care to hear Keisha's problems, but would much rather hear her compliments instead.

The historical meaning of wrath is the act of rage or the need to get revenge, seek vengeance or hatred against someone or something. The rightful color of wrath is red. Red expresses rage, ruthlessness and quick-tempered decisions, which is why Fred's shirt is red. There is a cold and lonely impression to the scene. There are no bright colors in the car and the rain on the windows gives the feel that something bad is about to happen. The location of his car is significant because it is parked right outside of his job where he was just fired. The three shots in this scene focus on the character's face and the anger and disgust he feels right before he does the deed.

With the rise of unemployment, there has been an increase in laid off workers seeking vengeance for the perceived wrongdoing. According to Fontes (<http://www.tradingeconomics.com>), in March 2013, 11.7 million people were unemployed and "in 2010, 506 workplace homicides have occurred in the United States. Over 79 percent of these workplace homicides were shootings". A recent workplace homicide occurred in New York City on August 24, 2012, when a man named Jeffery Johnson was fired from Hazan Imports, across the street from the Empire State Building. Johnson came back and opened fire killing two employees, and injuring several others. In the scene of wrath, Fred's recent circumstances caused him to react in a way that reflects the statistic and illustrates the true meaning of wrath.

Greed is the obsession or need for material possessions and, or money. The historical color of greed is yellow, which is said to invoke anxiety,

and lead to emotional instability, and lack of compassion. The color yellow stands out in Edna's tank top in comparison to the cold, grimy, dark room. Edna, the strung out drug-addicted mother, is trying to calm her crying baby. With no food or clean diapers left, she pulls out a ten-dollar bill from her pocket. Deciding to get drugs, she takes a needle and leaves her infant alone and crying. Medium, close ups, and inserts, signifies the anguish and frustration the character feels. The wide shots display an uncaring and unfriendly feeling in the room. Edna disconnects herself from her child and puts her own obsession before the baby's needs.

Envy (jealousy) is the feeling of discontent towards a person's possessions, traits, status, talent, and or rewards. They typically yearn to have something that does not belong to them. The color green carries the traits of selfishness, being inconsiderate, and deviousness; it is also the color for envy. In the scene, two sisters are practicing for the last position on the cheerleading team. The younger sister, Victoria, is clearly better than her older sister Ashley. When Victoria exits the scene for a moment, Ashley decides to put eye drops in her sister's water to poison her. I directed the scene with the two sisters so that the viewer sees the juxtaposition of the bright and cheerful look at the same time as the evil doings of Ashley actions. The living room location is a good space for the two cheerleaders because it speaks of "home". This location gives Victoria the feeling that she is safe and away from any harm or danger. There is purposely little dialogue in this scene because the actions of Ashley speak volumes. The medium and close up shots are chosen to further enhance the reactions and feelings of the characters during the scene.

A true story of jealousy was the subject of the 1992 movie *Willing to Kill: The Texas Cheerleader Story*. In Channelview, Texas, Wanda Holloway, determined to get her daughter on the school's cheerleading team, decided to plot the murder of the competition. This epitomizes envy and shows the depths one will go to in order to get what they want.

Gluttony is recognized as the overconsumption of anything, especially food. Since the color of gluttony is orange, which stands for self-indulgence, I had the man wear an orange shirt. The scene takes place outside of a restaurant on a cool, breezy day. The characters are seemingly isolated from society to portray the way the world sees these two groups of people. The interaction of the gluttonous man and the homeless man shows an awkward and unwanted relationship. The medium and close up shot selections helped to capture the disgust and anguish of both men. The gluttonous man's disregard for the homeless man's hunger is a commentary on how society ignores the less fortunate.

Homelessness in the United States is a severely overlooked problem. According to Foscarnis, 3.5 million people are homeless in the United States each year. People seem to disregard the seriousness that this number represents because majority of people believe that their situation could have been avoided. Obesity is also a huge issue in the United States. "154.7 million Americans, ages 20 and older, are overweight or obese". These statistics helped shape the cruelty in the scene.

Sloth is the physical laziness of doing a task. This scene involves a young man, dressed in light blue. The color is characterized by passivity,

and in this case, obscenity. He is deeply immersed in a video game. Even though he needs to use the restroom, he does not want to stop playing his video game. The location is the living room of the young man's bachelor pad, which looks messy and filthy. Medium and insert shots are used to explain just how idle and sickening he is. The shots used in this scene provide the viewer with an upfront view of the young man's sloth-like tendencies.

An influence for this scene is the use of technology. As technology becomes more advanced, the world becomes lazier. Things are becoming easier and people are using technology to do certain everyday tasks, such as online banking and shopping. People can find entertainment and check in on loved ones, without even leaving their house.

The final sin is lust. Lust is an intense desire, typically of a sexual nature. However, in today's world, people can lust for any material thing: cars, homes, electronics, jobs, etc. Keisha is wearing a pink tank top, which is the color of lust. Pink represents the lack of will power and self-worth. The location of the bedroom is significant because most people find great comfort in their bedroom; they hide their inner desires here. This room allows people to be free and openly express themselves without judgments or criticism from the outside world. The walls of Keisha's bedroom are covered with pictures of blonde-haired Caucasian women, signifying her most wanted attributes. The scene is split up into two different looks. The first part of the scene is colder with an uncomfortable vibe. She is very disgusted with her appearance and the close up shots illustrate that anxiety. She then puts a paper in front of her face, when

she puts the paper down she is transformed into her version of a Caucasian women. After she “transforms”, there is a warmer feeling, almost surreal. Keisha is ecstatic with her superficial new look and cannot stop staring at herself. Influences like the media’s portrayal of Caucasian women as the ultimate standard of beauty and sex appeal, has caused many women from other ethnicities to emulate that look. “The beauty standard in America and most western societies has been an overall slim, Caucasian woman with light eyes and long straight hair. Although beauty standards vary significantly in different cultures, living in America, they have adopted the euro-centric beauty ideals from the predominant white society to a great extent”. Many celebrities of different ethnicities are changing their appearances to appear more attractive and closer to the standard of beauty. Martinez goes on to say “....rapper Lil Kim underwent several radical surgeries in order to change her appearance to a more “Caucasian” look”. This surgically enhanced look has become somewhat common and easily identifiable in today’s society. These influences on America, from the media and other outlets, were portrayed in this last scene. I believe this scene can bring awareness to the fact that the standard of beauty in America is tainted.

Conclusion

During my MFA journey, the main theme in my films is relationships. My interest in how people establish, maintain, or discontinue relationships is expressed. These works are greater insights into how people communicate with one another. I explore relationships between friends, lovers, family members, strangers, as well as internal relationship with self. I believe the world is built

upon relationships and the interactions between the people in them. My experiences encountered at The University of Texas at Arlington have led me to decide what I would like to do with my MFA degree in the future. This coming summer I will be moving to Atlanta, Georgia, where I plan to expand upon my knowledge of filmmaking. I also plan to teach high school and college, while continuing to explore and research all the avenues that film, video, and television have to offer.

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